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AUTHOR Bunda, Mary Anne
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ABSTRACT

It is important for assessment programs in higher education to provoke good internal evaluation efforts, but it is also hard to turn an assessment program into a viable evaluation program. This is because there are so many different audiences for the information being gathered about programs. Assessment as discussed in higher education literature is quite different from traditional evaluation literature, and seems to concentrate on defending the concept of measurement or on techniques of measurement. Literature often links assessment to accountability or program review efforts. In order to satisfy all of their publics, assessment coordinators should: (1) focus program evaluation so it can be immediately applied to the program re-direction steps; (2) focus it so broadly that the data will not change over a period of 5 or 10 years; and (3) be sure that in the design of the data collection and report, all needs have been satisfied for faculty and staff running the program and serving in advisory roles relevant to the program, for student services or other nonacademic personnel interested in student reaction to programs, and for academic administrators at all levels. Western Michigan University's assessment position is described, and task/studies (a study of the general education program using ACT-COMP and an alumni survey) associated with the assessment project are noted. Principles of practice are explained with an emphasis on three that enhance the probability of the use of the assessment information in analyzing institutional policies and practices. The assessment currently being used in higher education literature, and at Western Michigan, is a position midway between review and evaluation. Contains 10 references. (SM)

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Assessment and Policy Analysis in Higher Education*

by

Mary Anne Bunda
Western Michigan University

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Introduction

Let me begin by saying that assessment programs in higher education ought to be, or provoke, good internal evaluation efforts. Now that that is out of the way, I can go on to show you how difficult it is to turn an assessment program into a viable evaluation program. Evaluation has to gather information that people care about so that it can answer their unique questions about a program. The application of the information to a set of real evaluation questions by real audiences of evaluation reports, is the piece that is missing from the Assessment literature. The problem is the number of different audiences and clients for the information which can be collected about programs.

Assessment, as discussed in the higher education literature, is very different from the traditional evaluation literature. Rather than concentrate on the way the information can be used, it seems to concentrate on defending the concept of measurement per se (Ewell, 1985b) or on techniques of measurement (Ewell, 1985a). The object of the evaluation is sometimes an individual student, e.g. the use of Junior Rising Examination in some states (Adelman, 1984), sometimes an institutional program, e.g. general education, sometimes a program of a specific department, e.g. majors assessment, sometimes a vague concept, e.g. the requirement for institutional effectiveness data by some accrediting agencies or sometimes merely a single methodology or a single instrument, e.g. an alumni survey or the use of the GRE. Additionally, some of the literature links the assessment process to accountability or program review efforts (Ewell, 1983). Let me suggest that while these definitions may be inviting to administrators looking for rational ways to make program budgeting decisions (or ways to make priorities appear rational) and to legislators who want to know what they are paying for, I don't think that linking money to outcomes is healthy for higher education. Getting people to review data in order to make judgments and plans for their programs is a healthy development.

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Clearly, some of these uses of Assessment are not and cannot be program evaluation. Of the five uses previously mentioned, three can never develop into program evaluation. A definition that uses only a methodology or a single instrument is clearly too narrow to be evaluation. Most descriptions of alumni surveys don't even suggest what is to be asked. That is, the object of the evaluation is not addressed at all in the discussion. The "assessment" of students by Junior Rising Examinations or other instruments used in conjunction with a required level of performance, may produce some programatic reform -- may produce some information useful to someone. But, clearly, the object in this case is the student -- although the rhetoric generally portrays this action as a quality control effort. The reforms which may take place are generally forced upon institutions from state legislatures and may or may not improve the quality of education. I think we have seen assessments of this variety in K-12 produce nothing more than concentration on the minima of education or produce state wide curricula which most higher education institutions would oppose. Assessment programs designed to measure "institutional effectiveness" may be as vaguely conceived as the term and may produce no useful information -- but will still cost a bundle. The other two conceptions of assessment are easily transformed into agenda items for program evaluation studies. The task for a coordinator of assessment is to clarify the meaning of the object and identify the relevant audiences for the evaluation. But assessment carries with it some expectations that are also related to the institutional research functions in Universities. It implies, in most cases, the collection of new information which is incorporated into a longitudinal data base concerning students and new ways to describe how we change students. The various planned efforts to change students are the objects of assessment. Those who oppose assessment generally will not specify the ways in which we want students to change. The questions of which programs to investigate first and which to investigate on a continuing basis is clearly a matter of institutional choice.

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The definition of the object is, then, generally not difficult, it is the specification of the audiences, the power the audiences have over the design of any study and the assumption by most people that assessment means the use of a single instrument over a long period of time that create the problems. Essentially, in order to satisfy all of the publics you work for, assessment coordinators should 1) focus the evaluation of the program so finely that it can be immediately applied to program re-direction steps, 2) focus the evaluation of the program so broadly that the data won't change over a 5 or 10 year period and 3) be sure that in the design of the data collection and the report you have satisfied the needs of a) the faculty or staff who operate the program, b) the faculty or staff who serve an advisory or policy making role relevant to the program under study (anyone who has ever worked with a curriculum committee knows what it is like to work with these people), c) student services and other non-academic personnel who are interested in student reaction to programs and d) academic administrators at all levels-- deans, vice-presidents, etc.

All of these elements can't be put into place for all programs in an institution and perhaps, can't be satisfactorily put in place for any one institutional level program. The issue, it seems to me, has a lot to do with how programs are organized and the complexity of shared governance in the institution. Any institution which is considering assessment will no doubt put its own stamp on the process. Structures and strategies which lead to the appropriate use of evaluation are bound, to some degree, by the context in which the evaluation is performed. In order to understand why assessment is organized the way it is at Western Michigan University, you have to understand something about us. Western has the Carnegie Code of Doctoral I. We are the only institution in our state with that rating. Michigan has no history of a strong coordinating board in higher education at the state level. We have a complex complement of higher education institutions in the state, with two big ten institutions, a large urban research institution and a

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large number of comprehensive regional colleges. It is unlikely that a state law will pass similar to the Florida "Junior Rising" requirement or the Tennessee budget supplement bill. There are seven degree granting colleges at Western at the undergraduate level -- Health and Human Services, Business, Engineering and Applied Sciences, Education, Fine Arts, Arts and Sciences, and the Division of Continuing Education. The student population at WMU is approximately 23,000. The ratio of graduate to undergraduate instruction is the third highest in the state and the extension to on-campus ratio is the second highest in the state. We see ourselves as a regional institution with a national reputation. We are the only comprehensive university on the west side of the state and thus have a role in the economic and cultural life of the community. However, because we operate a moderate number of graduate programs and have faculty relatively active in research, we also see ourselves as active nationally.

The Assessment Position in the Institution

The Office of Institutional Assessment reports directly to the Provost of the institution. The general focus of the activities of the office are negotiated with the Provost. Figure 1 shows you an analysis of the various program components which figure into the negotiations. Let me define the various program elements and the rationales for the users (audiences) listed. The indicators used are clearly a matter of local validity. Two of the studies will be described in some detail below with the validity rationale incorporated into the description.

The entry diagnosis component of assessment is the most federated operation of the office. It provides information to the Provost concerning the use of tests across the institution as a placement device. Additionally, the local entry measures are linked to external measures whenever possible to judge concurrent validity and reviews on a regular basis, policies across the institution which impact entering freshman. Most institutions of higher education have this operation up and running. They simply consider it part of admissions to the institution and/or

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allow departments to operate a placement system independent of institutional policy. The advantage to us in considering it part of the assessment program is that we can have a regular review of the validity of departmental tests and maintain an institutional perspective on the admissions and placement policy as they are operationalized by each of the departments and colleges.

At the university level, two major programs are under study -- intellectual skills (primarily reading, writing, and mathematics lower division requirements) and general education (a distribution system across the humanities, social and natural sciences). Each of these programs has an operational component in almost every college in the institution. The mechanism selected for working with the various faculty groups is unique to Western. No new advisory bodies have been developed as part of the assessment program, although some would suggest that new structures of advisory bodies are needed. The survival and use of the information depends upon the degree to which it can fit into the institutional structure which already exists. While the Faculty Senate Council, which deals with the entire Undergraduate Curriculum (U.S.C), and the Senate itself get annual reports on the achievement of the students, the real evaluative use of the data is planned for the College Curriculum Committees. The data which are collected institution wide are shared with the college level committees. The college committees are asked to critique the reports and focus the integration of additional institutional data into the assessment reports. Let me hasten to add that these data probably do not answer targeted questions about specific college programs and the college committees are encouraged to collect more data to help them with revision of curriculum, so that their program offerings fit into the definitions of Undergraduate Education which come from the Undergraduate Studies Council. The major definitions of the curriculum are at the institutional level, but the strategies for achieving those ends happen at the college level.

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The assessment of majors is the closest thing we have in operation to real evaluation. It involves working with small committees in each department. We are in the process of phasing in each of the departments. This is a very small operation right now. The departmental committee selects the methodology they want to use to assess majors. The data collection occurs within the department and is coordinated by OIA. Some of the professional schools will no doubt develop a college core that each department in the college will use.

The Academic Support Programs and the Campus Environment Programs are all operated by non-faculty groups. The ASP's are those programs that clearly impact the achievement of departmental ends, for instance, the library, computer center, advising offices. The Campus Environment Programs are those which contribute to the general growth and development of the student population, e.g. residence halls, fraternities, etc. Elements of these programs have been included in the alumni survey, but focused evaluation on an individual program is not part of the operation of the assessment office. The reports concerning the perceptions of these programs have a very complex constituency of audiences.

Tasks/Studies Associated with the Assessment Project

Let me briefly illustrate the operation of assessment by describing two very different activities. In one case, the assessment uses a nationally available standardized instrument and is relevant to an academic program across the institution, while the other case uses a locally developed instrument that crosses academic programs with student services interests.

ACT-COMP

We have designed a study of the general education program using ACT-COMP. We have drawn random samples of freshmen and seniors to whom we have administered the instrument. The COMP matches our definition of general education adequately, as it covers social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, and produces skill sub-scores that are of interest to the

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faculty. Additionally, it was selected because the individual students would receive information concerning their development that is not available at the same cost of time and money with the ETS instrument (Academic Profile). Materials were prepared for our primary curriculum policy making bodies which showed the overlap between the objectives of the COMP and the objectives of the general education program at Western during the first cycle of use. Additionally, all of the faculty who serve on curriculum committees at the college and university level were invited to participate in an administration of the COMP so that they would have some hands-on experience with the test. Having faculty understand the instrument is essential to its acceptance. And the acceptance of COMP as a good, but partial indicator of general education, is essential to the acceptance of assessment. Unless faculty are willing to accept an imperfect match between any instrument and the program, they will not see the need for multiple measures. Assessment discussions under these conditions become an endless search for the perfect instrument. The fact that COMP is norm referenced is important to the faculty and administration at the institution. It provides us with exterior benchmarks. This is particularly important at our institution because we have no peer school within the state. Moreover, our first analytical questions have very little to do with the high anxiety questions of differences among our own colleges. A university level report was prepared for the Faculty Senate and for the Undergraduate Studies Council. Deans and chairs of College Curriculum Committees received the university level report and a supplement which described their own college. Because of the large number of our graduates who transfer to us from other post-secondary institutions, we are concerned about differences between beginners and transfer students. I suspect that this use of the instrument is substantially different than the use made at smaller institutions. It seems clear to most faculty that this provides us with a data base to analyze some of the policies which have been used to design degree and general education

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requirements, but more data is clearly needed. The concern for data has initiated a change in policy. The size of the senior volunteer sample was so small that a graduation requirement for participation in assessment has been put into place for 1989-90. Assessment in general education has now been institutionalized.

Alumni Survey

A survey is planned for two undergraduate classes (1981 and 1986) to assess the perceptions of the alumni with respect to the quality of their experience and to measure the frequency of some behaviors which we consider indicative of a university education. The two classes will provide us with some indication of change in perception, if it has occurred. Additionally, before the survey instrument was developed, each of the chairs and deans were asked about the level of information they had on alumni. There is a great deal of variation among the departments with respect to contact with the alumni. We have offered to share data with any unit within the institution and have received a great deal of support for this study. Additionally, we established two separate internal review panels during the development process to enhance the use of the information. A Prime User Panel has been established at the institutional level composed of a representative from the alumni area, the student services area, and academic affairs. Each of these offices will use the information in the development and revision of programs. A Technical Review Panel has been established to review the instrument and cover letter for technical adequacy prior to mailing. Each of the members of the panel has expertise in survey research and each is a faculty member of a different college. This panel not only serves as a valuable resource to the development team, but also their review of the instrumentation enhances the usefulness of the data at the college level. Thus, while the data concern a very different perspective on outcomes of college, the premise of college use of the information for program and policy review is consistent with other assessment activities. The

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use of the college level committees brings coordination to efforts for change.

Principles of Practice

I have not been involved in assessment nearly as long as the other members of the panel, therefore, I'm a little concerned about telling people how to do it. But, at least we have started on our campus. There seems to me to be three principles that will enhance the probability of the use of the assessment information in the analysis of institutional policies and practices.

First, the faculty of the institution have got to be involved and committed to the use of data in decision-making. This happens if the persons who are responsible for the assessment are open to suggestions about what to assess and open to meeting with people so that each person (no matter what their academic specialty) understands what is going on. Faculty must feel that the administration of a test or a survey will not take away their rights as curriculum developers. I think that it is important to separate the assessment function from the instructional development function in the institution and also from the budgetary functions. Faculty want to be sure that the person who administers the test and analyzes the data is not making course requirement decisions. Additionally, faculty who are influential curriculum leaders at the college level deserve special attention. Each of the colleges must be part of the system or the institution is not described in its full complexity. Working at the college level provides a sense of synthesis in the non-major program areas which cannot be achieved at the institutional level. Data collection which is already a part of the individual college or department must be honored as an important activity. It must be clear that every effort will be made to make the institutional level data complement the unit data.

Second, the reason for embarking on assessment has got to be a commitment to quality service for students and students have to be a high priority item at the institution. This can't be all rhetoric, everyone has to believe this is why assessment is going on. If everyone at the

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institution sees the ultimate objective, then artificial barriers which we construct between student services offices, advising offices, and faculty soon begin to come down, and people use the data to work with each other. The level of cooperation with our alumni survey has been exceptional. It seems to me that this sort of cooperation is essential in the analysis of policies set in higher educational institutions. A change in the graduation requirements clearly are primarily a faculty or academic decision and yet this change will impact on the programs and services in student services. These offices must talk to each other and be true partners in the educational experience. So far we have made some headway in the development of the partnership and it's because of data collection planning. The concern for students is clearly something we all share. If the major rationale is budgetary efficiency, everyone pulls in to protect their own turf.

Third, a serious effort has to be made **not** to use terms which will elicit tension/paranoia such as evaluation or review. Faculty who are developing or using instruments are constantly worried about what will happen to their request for a new position if they look bad. I'm sure that the tension will always be there, but the destructive nature of it can be held to a minimum. We have accomplished this by putting the assessment job in the hands of someone who is seen primarily as an information provider not a decision-maker. Assessment is a staff position not a line position. A second effort is to show that the data are to be used primarily for curriculum reform and policy analysis. Some colleges and departments have requested special reports targeted to their own needs. These requests have been described to other units as important moves by the requesting departments. However, we have been very careful to point out that comparisons among the departments and units are not helpful in the redesign of programs. Also, analysis of the institutional assessment data won't necessarily lead to clear steps for improvement. Units within the institution are encouraged to collect their own data for design

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which supplements the institutional assessment data.

I'm not saying that there is never a situation in which an academic administrator would want to compare internal units. This may be the point at which I should differentiate between review, evaluation and assessment. Review is the use of data by academic administrators in order to make budgetary decisions about units. The data, or at least the definitions of the variable types, must be more or less comparable across the institution and must be consistent with the mission and goals of the institution. The data do represent a variety of dimensions including financial, e.g. production of outside grants; load items, e.g. credit hour production, majors, and minors; and quality indicators, e.g. faculty awards, and student awards. The nature of the data set allows for comparisons across units and allows for a criterion level to be set for a particular unit or group of units as is the case with college level goals. The mechanism by which a unit is to achieve a particular level is not, however, determined necessarily by the central administration. This process allows the institution as a whole to have a coherent set of goals to which each of the units contribute. Necessarily, the variables which are part of the review process are set by the central administration. The units must see them as representative of the goals of the institution as a whole and as relevant to quality judgments of post-secondary institutions in general, but they do not have to set the same priority among the variables.

On the other hand, evaluation is a process which is designed primarily at the individual unit level. The variable selection must be made by individuals who will design strategies to respond to the data. Questions, which focus the evaluation, respond to issues which are current and central to the program at the unit level. These questions may be shared by other units on the campus, but they don't require consensus on the campus. More often than not the questions are a compromise position which take into account campus priorities, priorities in the discipline,

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and priorities in the current faculty. We are not doing evaluation in this sense across all of the program components that are listed on Figure 1.

Assessment, as it is currently being used in the higher education literature and at Western, is a position mid-way between review and evaluation. It can allow for various University policies to be reconsidered. It can provide for educational activities to be discussed within a context of objective information. A number of different evaluation audiences can use assessment data. It provides information concerning areas of interest broadly of interest on campus. However, it does not result in data which are of equal value for each of the units. In some cases, the assessment information may become part of an evaluation plan for a particular unit which sees the outcomes as central to their mission. In other cases, the assessment data are a point of information which does not necessarily require action. The assessment data allow units on campus to focus evaluations of their own work and decide the extent to which they will use data which are already available to them. It allows for a discussion of goals and priorities which are anchored in the reality of student outcomes, thus enhancing decision-making on campus across a wide variety of areas. It does not speak to the issue of recommended actions in the same way that evaluation should, nor does it necessarily imply budgetary consequences in the same way that review does.

I'm sure my colleagues on the panel will have more to say about these issues.

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Program Element	Entry Diagnosis	University Level		Majors	Academic Support	Campus Environment
		Intellectual Skills	General Education			
Objective Indicators	ACT Intell. Skills Tests a. Reading b. Writing c. Math Skills Placement Tests a. Math b. Chem CLEP tests	CAAP PPST for Ed. College	COMP	Majors Assessment Certification Exams GRE GMAT LSAT NTE MCAT DAT Placement data	User Rates Retention Impact Pace Instrument	Pace Instrument
Subjective Judgmental Indicators	a. HSGPA b. Transcript Analysis c. Survey data	In House Survey a. Leavers b. Current c. Alum GPA	In House Survey a. Leavers b. Current c. Alum GPA	In House Survey a. Leavers b. Current c. Alum GPA ESS Accreditation info	In House Survey a. Leavers b. Current c. Alum ESS	In House Survey a. Leavers b. Current c. Alum ESS
Users	Provost Admissions College Dept. where applicable	Provost U. S. C. Program Unit	Provost Senate Senate Council College Curr Comm & Dean	Provost Dept. Unit College in Prof. School case	Provost Unit	Provost Unit Other V.P. where applicable

Figure 1: Analysis of Program Components